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ABSTRACT

Six independent study projects are offered to students in an introductory psychology course at the University of Houston. The projects include a term paper, book critique, independent research project, audio and/or visual demonstration, research assistance to a faculty member, and a community service option. The most popular of these projects is the community service option which is selected by 31% of the students. The project consists of working as a volunteer for 30 to 40 hours in a pre-authorized community service agency. Data are collected by students and faculty members about agencies in the Houston area such as churches, schools, hospitals, rehabilitation clinics, and halfway houses. Fact sheets are compiled for each agency including address, telephone, contact person within the agency and at the University of Houston, status of the volunteer program, volunteer activities, and nature of the population which the agency serves. Student activities within the agency are supervised and evaluated by an agency representative. At the end of the course, students are asked to evaluate agency activities and goal achievement. Evaluations of the volunteer program indicate that it increases student understanding of the job market, links abstractions of the classroom with the reality of activity in a community agency, and offers significant volunteer services to agencies which are often in need of qualified volunteers. (DB)

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# Experiential learning in introductory psychology: Student's perspective

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Tomorrow it all starts again--for me at least. 11- or 1200 students enroll in our introductory psychology course at the University of Houston, about 90% of them my responsibility. We've spoken here at APA in the past about some of the things we do with that course, but we've never really dwelled on one of the features that students report--semester after semester--to be their favorite portion of the course. That's the portion of the course that is up to them to design, conduct and report on for a portion of their total grade. It's called the Independent Project option, but before describing that, let's put the course as a whole in perspective for you.

In many major universities the introductory psychology course has since the early 70s been the most popular offered. We peaked a couple of years ago, but seem to be holding our own or dropping only slightly. The collective student body served by the course is drawn from many different colleges across our university, reflecting--of course--both the varying curricular requirements of their colleges and the diverse life goals of the individual students. The curriculum requirements speak for themselves--unaffected, it seems, by the wishes of individual faculty--so we'll set them aside. But those diverse life goals bear some examination.

At the University of Houston, almost 33% of our students--in a typical semester--come from the College of...Business Administration(!). Another 15% come from Natural Sciences, and 14% from Humanities and Fine Arts. In fact, fourth in line, only

SP 011 581

12½% of our students come from our College of Social Sciences. That includes 4.2% of the total enrolled at thestart of the course as psychology majors. Almost half of the remaining 26% come from Education, and the rest are spread across the other six undergraduate colleges of the University.

In the Fall 1977 semester--last Fall--I am examining here, we actually had 1,271 students. Of those 53% were freshmen and 24% sophomores; 15% were juniors, 8% seniors. I burden you with these statistics because it sets the stage for the discussion to follow. In short, these are students with diverse--often only partially formulated--career and personal goals.

Klingelhofer (1972) was among the first to comment on the impact of civil rights legislation and desegregation on increasing the diversity of students--especially freshmen--who began enrolling in our college-level courses in the late 60's. David Senn at Clemson noted the 114% growth in psychology enrollments during the 1970s alone. But he also noted that "The majority of published articles dealing with the teaching of introductory psychology are concerned with various instructional methods" (1977, p. 124).

In respone to this increasing diversity and numerous other factors, we psychologists have collectively devoted a lot of time to analyzing new teaching strategies in the past decade. These strategies have ranged from variants of the PSI technique (Johnson & Ruskin, 1977) to computer-managed instruction (Kelley, 1972) and television (McKinney, 1977)--both of which we have implemented in some sections of our introductory psychology course at Houston within the last two years. But these are content concerns in some senses--concerned mainly with how the course is shaped and offered to students.

Another, but more recent, effort has begun to surface concerned specifically with course process--especially with how students are learning and (more importantly) applying that content. Today's symposium is but one symptom of that concern. There are other symptoms. Donald Wolfgang commented in December 1976 ToP on the problems of supervising undergraduate field experiences. We'll return to that shortly. Another was

Senn's 1977 paper that I mentioned briefly earlier. His, in some ways, is a rather disturbing paper--for reasons directly related to today's symposium topic.

Briefly, he conducted an extensive survey comparing student ratings of an introductory psychology course offered at Clemson as a general survey course with comparable student ratings of three distinct topical courses at Monmouth College--focussed on psychobiology and conditioning, human intelligence, thought and memory, and a third on personality and social behavior. Not too surprising was the finding that the last course--personality and social behavior--gained the highest overall rating, the most disparate ratings in favor of topical vis-a-vis survey coverage, and the most positive attitude toward psychology. But I am worried about introducing "topicalness" even at the introductory level. Without flattering any of us here gathered, I think you can appreciate the value of some breadth in perspective when it comes time to read of psychology's latest political forays in Congress or electing a new president in the pages of the Monitor!

But I digress. What are we to do with 1200 students starting tomorrow morning at the University of Houston...and elsewhere across our country and Canada? At Houston, 0-33% of our students' total introductory course grade is based on an "independent project" Students may--at their own discretion--opt to do one of six projects. One is the "cop-out" option--a term paper--and 20% do select it despite all sorts of social and intellectual counter-pressures from an erstwhile instructor. That's probably a tribute to the fraternity file system as much as student laziness. Another option is a book critique--not a review. 22% select this option. A third is to serve as a research assistant for a faculty member or graduate student (prescreened) in conducting ongoing research. 7% select this option, but interestingly, this option is limited by the number of opportunities, not the number of undergraduates who would select it! A fourth option is to conduct a piece of supervised, but independent research--12% elect to do so. We've tested everything from the Pepsi Challenge--and that's worth a paper in itself some day--to the behavior of people on the fifth floor of our library in front of whom the elevator door

slides open to reveal five people facing backward! A fifth option is to develop audio and/or video demonstrations for the course--8% (a number from art) opt for this. However, the largest single group select the final option which is to do volunteer work in a pre-authorized community service agency--31% seek this option. Why and how is the subject of the rest of my comments

This community service option is clearly the most popular. We've studied the external community agencies--what they do and how they do it--that are most successful in (a) attracting student volunteers, (b) meeting their own needs with our students, and most importantly (c) meeting our own educational objectives by means of their activities.

I'd like to concentrate on three aspects of this option--the initial activities preceding placement of the student, our attempts to supervise and influence what happens in the agency, and the process by which we evaluate both the agency and the student's contribution to it and to his/her own education.

First, let's look at how we established contact with the agencies. A number of strategies have been used, and I will not pretend for a minute that these were all thought out in advance. Rather, as with so many educational ventures--a series of smart decisions are still having "ripple" effects, most of which continue to aid our progress toward successful placement. One move, then, by another faculty member was to enroll several undergraduates to conduct a survey of all the agencies we could conceive of in the greater Houston area (2½ million) who might be using psychological principles in delivering their services. We called asking a couple of general screening questions about what the University of Houston could offer and the possible needs of that agency. From among several hundred agencies screened, a one-page fact sheet was developed listing obvious things such as the agency's name, address, and telephone, as well as a contact person. The fact sheet then pretty well disects the agency: Do they have a volunteer program? (yes, no, had in past but not now, haven't but would take volunteers, or no program as such but take volunteers). A brief description of possible volunteer activities

was solicited, including listing any special requirements of volunteers such as time or skill. We also--and this is important for information to follow--ask about the existence of a training program for volunteers. We seek information about how volunteers are supervised and what experiences or skills a volunteer might gain.

Another member of our faculty supervised the collection of this data, and from it she developed loose-leaf notebook which lists all the agencies. In the Table of Contents these agencies are then cross-referenced as to the opportunities they offer (recreation, visiting or companionship, testing/evaluation, research assistance, teaching/tutoring/speaking, counseling, advocacy, crisis intervention, as well as step'n'fetchit tasks such as errands or clerical work). The book is also cross-referenced by age of the population to be helped as well as the specialized nature of the population. It's a most valuable resource.

Second, specifically for the introductory psychology course I have developed a fact sheet which contains (for the agencies with whom we work most closely a similar array of information. We have established a "University of Houston" contact person in each of our cooperating agencies. We list his/her name and telephone, hours of availability, as well as when and if special introductory programs will be offered. These sheets are posted, along with an indication of the number of volunteer positions available. Students are asked to sign the sheet before contacting the agency, and thus the sheet can be removed once a sufficient number of students have signed up.

Thirdly, we also use students as resources--and this is a surprisingly good vehicle by which to identify new opportunity. 1000 students at a time, you don't miss many opporutnities that are developing in a community! But this has been especially valuable in reaching two kinds of not-frequently-solicited agencies--city schools and church-related groups.

Finally, in order to keep our own list of opportunities current, we reestablish telephone contact with the major agencies each Fall. We also monitor student reports,

and major foul-ups are almost always "called" to the instructor's attention within hours of their occurrence!

In addition, to foster contact with the agency, we publish several pages of guidelines in Psymple Psych--a 275-page course outline for the introductory course. We list the general responsibilities of the student as a public representative of the University, and we indicate both what the student should report to us at semester's end as well as the basis on which the report will be graded. Placement is critical, and we devote about 25% of the semester to just this activity. One graduate student is assigned full-time to monitor the placement activities and the agencies themselves.

The issue of supervision is not an easy one. The course itself is the primary vehicle for conveying the content of the discipline, and since this is almost always the students first formal contact between him- or her-self as a budding or potential psychologist and any community agency, we are relying on this primarily as a first exposure--mainly for experience, not so much for highly structured, "behaviorally objectivized" education. It seems to work. We do very occasionally experience instances where students get blocked into step'n fetchit jobs masquerading as genuine service opportunities, but those are few and far between--more than countered by the "critical incident" reports we get from students significantly moved by their volunterr work.

Our formal evaluation procedures are simple. The agency representative agrees in exchange for the volunteered time (30-40 hours spread over 3-3½ months) to monitor the hours of attendance, the actual work of the volunteer, and to supply us with a simple evaluation of the student's contribution to the agency's own continuing tasks. Second, from the students, one of the items on which we ask them to report is their evaluation of the agency--confidential, of course. We seek their impressions of what the agency is attempting to achieve, how well the student thinks these goals are being achieved, and any independent evidence the student can muster to support his/her claims. Keeping track of these reports is a remarkably effective means of staying on top of the agencies with whom we do work.

Two other kinds of evaluations are worth examining here briefly. One is the student ratings of the independent project. In the course evaluations we have regularly asked students to evaluate the fact that none, 25% or 33% of their grade (depending on specific options each semester)is based on these independent projects. With no reward, few elect to volunteer. Given the work load generated by the volunteer work, students electing this option have regularly indicated that gaining only 25% of their grade was too little reward for the effort required. The only danger with upping the credit to 33% as a course requirement is simply--again, those diverse career goals--simply that some students are not interested in any form of independent project. As a result we have now made the project optional--to be done in lieu of one of the three noncumulative course tests. It is hoped that this arrangement will fit a variety of options--stressing academics for those not interested in independent work, but encouraging--and rewarding--those who are. For results, tune in next year.

And another way to evaluate these volunteer service options is to determine the links between volunteering and our graduates' employability upon graduation with a bachelor's degree. In a telephone interview conducted in 1976 (Bridges, unpublished ms.)--reaching approximately 100 graduates of the undergraduate program still living in the greater Houston metropolitan area--it was found that 23% were involved in direct services delivered to humans. Interestingly, two years ago only 1% of the total sample reached had extended their initially informal volunteer services into a job upon graduation, yet 38% of the total sample cited the introductory psychology course as supplying information relevant to their current job. It was the most frequently cited course. That means (a) it is directly related, and these volunteer options are beginning to have an impact, and/or (b) the course and the question were both so general that a survey course such as our introductory offering simply had to qualify because of the broad, albeit shallow coverage offered across such a wide range of topics. The department is mounting a survey this Fall to focus--among other things--on which courses and activities in the

undergraduate program do most directly meet the needs of students as they move into the job market. That will provide us with an opportunity to upgrade our data.

The informal, ad hoc indexes do clearly indicate that a small, but steady minority of students are very well served and educated by these volunteer services opportunities. It orients them early toward educating themselves for a career--an emphasis we have stressed more and more in recent years. The agencies are very well served. Indeed, the only terminations of university-agency contacts has been initiated by us due to (a) agencies making too many demands on our volunteers to the detriment of the students' other studies, and/or (b) training sessions which we viewed to be insufficient for our purposes. No agency has ever withdrawn itself from our cooperative venture. Thus, finally, the University itself is being well served by the program. The positive benefits of this volunteer services option are reflected in the fact that even within psychology such options are now part of courses we offer in (1) mental retardation, (2) behavior modification, (3) social psychology, and (4) industrial/organizational psychology.

There must be a flaw in this seemingly idyllic effort, but it is not obvious to the casual--or even the calculating, examining--eye. My experience with experiential learning has made me a fan of the effort. It links the abstractions of the classroom with the realities of--a run-down retirement home, a first-rate hospital volunteer program, a crisis-hotline service, reading tutorial programs for the economically disadvantaged, and a wide variety of school- and church-related recreation programs.